

CAN OLD-TIME DIPLOMACY CHECK SOVIET POWER?

Mr. Kennan and the Politics of Containment

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IT IS probably intellectual snobbery to suggest that the trouble with American foreign policy has been that the men who make it do not read books, especially books written by foreigners. Or if they read them, they do not take them seriously. Yet it does seem that, with Hitler's *Mein Kampf* in print, Cordell Hull and his successors might have been better prepared for the events in Europe of the 30's. And there is little evidence that in dealing with the events of the 40's, our policy-makers were armed with an understanding of Lenin's works and Stalin's emendations of them. Facing the 50's, we can only hope that somebody in Washington is reading Jawaharlal Nehru and Mao Tse-tung.

These observations are somewhat irrelevantly inspired by the minor furor created by an American foreign policy-maker who did read a book, George F. Kennan. Mr. Kennan has read, among other things, the works of Lenin. On the basis of these read-

ings, and of his diplomatic experience, he wrote an urbane, learned, and perceptive essay, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," which appeared in *Foreign Affairs* in 1947. The essay was signed "Mr. X," presumably out of deference to the feeling that a public display of cerebration by a State Department official was unseemly. When it became known that "Mr. X" was director of the Policy Planning Staff of the State Department, two curious developments followed.

First, intelligent people of varying views closed ranks around Mr. Kennan. A thoughtful official was rare enough to require solidarity among the thoughtful. There grew up a kind of Kennan cult to encourage reflection in the State Department. This cult should be joined. It has nothing to do with just what it is Kennan thinks or with the objective value of his thinking. His essay, by itself, was an able but minor contribution to the literature on Stalinism. It was remarkable because it came from a high official.

Second, because Kennan's essay held that the Soviets are serious about their intentions and should be contained, he swiftly became an object of intense interest among anti-Communists, and especially among the non-Communist leftists who tended to claim him as one of their own. This tendency could draw no support from the actual content of Kennan's article. It was perhaps based on a liberal delusion that all men of urbanity, learning, or perception must be liberals.

It is now possible to clarify matters, and since Kennan has returned to government service as Ambassador to Moscow, matters are worth clarifying. He has provided a fuller statement of his views in a book, *American Diplomacy 1900-1950* (University of Chicago Press). Though the book suffers from reticences that are probably due to the au-

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thor's expectation of continuing his diplomatic career, it is explicit enough to warrant the conclusion that, while Kennan is indeed thoughtful and in favor of containing Communism, he is also—in the literal sense of the word—a reactionary.

KENNAN's book consists of two parts. The first contains six lectures given recently at the University of Chicago in which he appraises the main aspects of our foreign relations during the last fifty years. The other consists of his two articles on Russia in *Foreign Affairs*, the second being "America and the Russian Future," which appeared in April 1951. Kennan suggests that the second part can be taken as reflecting the intellectual approach of the first.

The burden of Kennan's containment essay published in 1947 is familiar. His analysis of Soviet conduct leads him to the conclusion that "there can never be on Moscow's side any sincere assumption of a community of aims between the Soviet Union and powers which are regarded as capitalism." He also finds that the Soviet Union is weaker than the Western world, that its policy is highly flexible, and that its society probably contains seeds of decay which are already sprouting. Therefore he suggests "a policy of firm containment, designed to confront the Russians with unalterable counter-force at every point where they show signs of encroaching upon the interests of a peaceful and stable world." Because Kennan does not enlarge on this policy, I quote another of his definitions of containment: "the adroit and vigilant application of counter-force at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points, corresponding to the shifts and maneuvers of Soviet policy, but which cannot be charmed or talked out of existence." Holding the line, plus a vague regeneration of American life, would promote tendencies that will result in "either the break-up or the gradual mellowing of Soviet power."

Kennan's second essay considers what kind of Russia we would like to have in the world community and how we can facilitate its

coming into being. He sees no use in looking for "a capitalistic and liberal-democratic" Russia. The most we may hope from Russia is "that she lift forever the Iron Curtain, that she recognize certain limitations to the internal authority of government, and that she abandon, as ruinous and unworthy, the ancient game of imperialist expansion and oppression."*

Kennan argues eloquently against a Vansittartist approach to Russia. All humanity is in some degree vulnerable to totalitarianism, he says. We must constantly hold before the Russian people evidences of our sympathetic understanding, even if we have to go to war against them. If release can come to Russia "by erosion from despotism," we can help the process best by keeping alive the alternative of a decent civilization.

TO SAY, even cogently, that Soviet expansion should be contained, and that we should press for a new regime free of the excesses of totalitarianism, is no more controversial than the proposition that the cost of living should be contained. It will be questioned only by Stalinist fellow-travelers, advocates of preventive war, and pacifists. But, unfortunately, Kennan gives us little beyond the vaguest and most impalpable sense of the concrete reality of Communism: the brutal solidity of its totalitarian rule over Russia and her satellites, its unwavering pressure to extend that domination over the entire globe. Unhappily, too—and perhaps in consequence of this first omission—he leaves us with only the meagerest definition of that "containment" which is to serve to restrain this literally awful force.

Does containment simply mean that the United States Marines come a-running, like Keystone cops, whenever something erupts at one of these "constantly shifting" points? Korea was open and legally recognizable aggression. It may perhaps not be so obvious

* Peter Meyer, in his article "The Driving Force Behind Soviet Imperialism" in the March COMMENTARY argues that, far from being "ancient," Russian expansion is something quite new under the sun.

in Viet Nam, Burma, Iran, Malaya. It may not be obvious at all in India or Italy. How does containment apply—in terms of general criteria—at these “geographical and political points,” at all of which there is evidence of Soviet encroachment?

More important, does “counter-force” mean physical force only? Presumably, it must include political measures. What kind of political measures? And can political measures mean much without economic action? Does counter-force, then, include economic aid? If so, on what scale and how applied? And do we do all this alone? Where, if anywhere, does the United Nations come in—militarily, politically, economically, morally?

KENNAN answers none of these questions directly. There are, however, clearly marked clues in the first part of his book. His reflections on American foreign policy during the last fifty years are delightfully poisonous. Much of what he says seems valid and has inevitably been said before. Again, the extraordinary thing is that it should come from a diplomat whose career is in high gear. Perhaps the explanation for Kennan's survival in the foreign service is the finesse with which he has accomplished his mayhem. He has removed all the stuffing from such hallowed shirts as John Hay's, but he has carefully buttoned up the shirts again, leaving the State Department's pantheon apparently intact.

Kennan's central criticism of our foreign policy is that it has never been based on any realistic notion of “the national interest.” It has amounted to a series of improvisations arising from moral and legal illusions and mischievous domestic pressures. In the decision to make war against Spain in 1898, “popular moods, political pressures, and inner-governmental intrigue were decisive,” and afterward we were left with possessions we were unequipped to handle. The Open Door policy seems to have been the result of a series of coincidences; it was meaningless before it was proclaimed, though this has not prevented the growth of a hardy myth that it was a triumph of American diplomacy. The

“Open Door,” like the “administrative and territorial integrity of China,” were high-sounding phrases that cost us nothing to enunciate and gave us a feeling of moral superiority and legal rectitude; but we never came forward with practical alternatives to the actions these policies proscribed, and the results of this sanctimonious irresponsibility are now visible in China. The First World War was “tragic and nonsensical” in its origin and in its course, and Versailles “was the sort of peace you get when you allowed war hysteria and impractical idealism to lie down together in your mind.”

Kennan is less sharp on the Second World War. By 1939, he seems to feel, so many opportunities had been lost that the war was unpreventable; he believes it was clear from the beginning that the war was not “fully winnable,” because military victory required the collaboration of one or another of the three totalitarian powers and such collaboration forestalled an unsullied democratic political victory.

With all that, however, he is surprisingly tolerant of wartime political decisions based on the hope that peaceful postwar collaboration with the Soviets was possible. Of this general attitude Kennan writes:

“Many of us who were familiar with Russian matters were impatient with this line of thought at the time, because we knew how poor were the chances of success, and we saw no reason why a Western world which kept its nerves, its good humor, and a due measure of military preparedness should not continue indefinitely to live in the same world with the power of the Kremlin without flying to either of the extremes of political intimacy or war. In the light of what has occurred subsequently, I can see that our view, too, was not fully rounded. We were right about the nature of Soviet power; but we were wrong about the ability of American democracy at this stage in its history to bear for long a situation full of instability, inconvenience and military danger.”

There is no Kennan program for the future conduct of our international relations. He has, however, a formula—it is not unfair

to say a panacea—called “old-fashioned diplomacy.” The ingredients of this formula are a mistrust of democratic impulses affecting the formulation of foreign policy, a profound scorn for the “legalistic-moralistic approach to international problems,” devotion to “the national interest,” and a conviction that international relations consist of little more than maintaining a balance between conflicting national interests. Almost anything else you can think of—most especially, world government of any kind—Kennan is against. It is through this panacea that Kennan emerges as the classical reactionary and, despite his policy-planning and ambassadorship, as an uncompromising opponent of the present tendency of American foreign policy.

CONSIDER, first, Kennan on democracy. Though he has little use for his predecessors in high places during the last fifty years, he almost invariably manages to absolve them by ascribing their follies to pressures from the people. McKinley is thus excused for the Spanish-American War. Hay must not be blamed: “He labored in a framework of government which was unsuited, really, to the conduct of the foreign affairs of a great power.” Kennan thinks World War I was unrelieved tragedy; but what he would have had Wilson do was impossible, he says, in the face of domestic political realities. What he regards as the great mistakes of World War II were not made by highly placed individuals; he suggests they were “the deeper mistakes of understanding and attitude on the part of our society in general.”

What bothers him most about a democratic society is its “failure to appreciate the limitation of war in general—any war—as a vehicle for the achievement of the objectives of the democratic state.” Force must be related to purpose and method. “If this were better understood, there could be neither the sweeping moral rejection of international violence which bedevils so many Americans in times of peace nor the helpless abandonment to its compulsions and its inner momentum which characterizes so many of us in times

of war.” Democracy fights in anger. The problem is how to employ force “for rational and restricted purposes.”

These are valid strictures. What would Kennan do about it? In what way is our “framework of government” (the same now as in Hay’s day) “unsuited” to the conduct of foreign affairs? How can the democratic process operate in our foreign relations without subverting the continuous devotion to the national interest that Kennan desires?

Kennan has two suggestions. He advances them casually, does not bother to argue in their favor, and himself dismisses them as impractical. The first is “much more effective use of the principle of professionalism,” which should not be impossible. The second is adoption of the British system of parliamentary responsibility. The second suggestion is a puzzle. In making it, Kennan complains that the machinery of decision-making lacks “privacy, deliberateness, or the long-term approach.” At the same time he advocates such a change because it would clarify the claim of an administration to speak for the mass of the people in foreign affairs. But Kennan’s repeated criticism of the phenomenon of public opinion in foreign affairs is not that it fails to register with the executive. He clearly feels that it registers too often and too effectively; his whole point is that public opinion is emotional and subjective, and therefore disastrous to the national interest. Giving the people the opportunity to change governments whenever their emotions change is hardly the answer to Kennan’s own complaint. It seems exactly the sort of thing that would further limit privacy, deliberateness, and the long-term approach—unless Kennan thinks that the professionals would somehow see to this, in which case it’s not more democratic responsiveness he wants but less. At any rate, he cannot have it both ways. It makes no sense to advocate a more direct voice for the people in foreign affairs when you deeply mistrust that voice.

KENNAN’S failure to grapple with this problem—in the context of his nostalgia

for old-fashioned diplomacy—raises a valid doubt about his fundamental understanding of democracy. In his essays on Russia, Kennan says that containment is not enough and that “the most important influence” we can exert on internal Russian developments is the influence of what we are. And what should we be? We must, Kennan says, give the world “the impression of a country which knows what it wants, which is coping successfully with the problems of its internal life and with the responsibilities of a World Power, and which has a spiritual vitality capable of holding its own against the major ideological currents of the time.” Kennan offers nothing more specific, except possibly this: “No iron curtain could suppress, even in the innermost depths of Siberia, the news that America had shed the shackles of disunity, confusion and doubt, had taken a new lease of hope and determination, and was setting about her tasks with enthusiasm and clarity of purpose.”

From a man who haughtily abjures moralistic clichés in international affairs, this string of Fourth of July phrases is a bewildering anti-climax. We always have cause to feel uneasy about men who think disunity and confusion are shackles on democracy that must be shed. Since Kennan believes that the solution of our internal problems may very well be “the most important influence” on the Soviets, he is called upon to reveal more of his own mind about these problems than is expressed in his obvious discomfort over the intellectual untidiness of democratic processes. It is easy to imagine solutions that would delight, not confound, Stalin. Conceivably one such solution could be the extension of the principles of “old-fashioned diplomacy” to the domestic scene, giving us old-fashioned solutions all along the line that avoid confusion and disunity.

The problem Kennan raises remains. It requires a bit of arrogance to decide which of the people’s impulses are—or even in retrospect were—wrong. Probably the kind of clear, smooth-running purposefulness that Kennan wants is unattainable in our democracy. Yet, less emotionalism in the public’s

response to events is no doubt desirable. The signs show that this is developing.

There is a difference between Korea and the Spanish-American War. Fifty years ago the people as a whole cared little about foreign policy and knew less. The State Department knew and cared only a little more. It was possible for William Randolph Hearst to create an uproar that sounded like the voice of the people and topple McKinley into a war. But the MacArthur uproar of the last year, which was an emotional orgy, did not become an irresistible cry for unlimited war. Kennan’s sharpest criticism of the democratic process in foreign affairs is that it runs away with itself in a war crisis. Force, he insists, must be used for “rational and restricted purposes.” On the whole, this is precisely how we have been using force for the last year and a half. There has been bitter controversy over Korea, but so far neither the people nor the executive have been panicked into irrationality.

Unlike the Spanish-American War, Korea has implications that the people recognize as immediate, ponderable, and directly affecting them. They will therefore think about them or listen to people who think about them. The Marshall Plan seems to have had general support and this could not have been purely on the basis of emotionalism; a little simple reasoning was required to see its point. In any case, the cure for a badly informed people is a better informed people, and not a retreat from the people altogether.

THIS regression from democracy—which I believe is essentially a flight from reality—is reflected in Kennan’s observations about the national interest and his strictures on the “legalistic-moralistic approach.”

Kennan doesn’t define the national interest. The doctrine of the national interest apparently means that whatever it is that the national interest is, can be defended only by an old-fashioned diplomatic game called balance of power, the playing of which game then becomes *in* the national interest. Anyone who is against old-fashioned diplomacy is therefore against the national interest.

Kennan's approach is that of "taking the awkward conflicts of national interest and dealing with them on their merits with a view to finding the solutions least unsettling to the stability of international life."

What he has no use for is the legalistic-moralistic approach, which is "to find some formal criteria of a juridical nature by which the permissible behavior of states could be defined." Only a part of international society would subordinate itself to international law, he says. As a result of national aspirations, international relationships constantly change. "A legal strait jacket" would inhibit rather than facilitate this process; to moderate these conflicts is "a task for diplomacy, in the most old-fashioned sense of the term."

Let's apply this pseudo-realism to reality. What the United States faces in the world is not "awkward conflicts" that require "least unsettling" solutions. There are dozens of "awkward conflicts" in the pending file but they are no immediate threat to civilization—except as they might affect the one conflict that overshadows all others, the conflict with Stalinist totalitarianism. This threat is different in kind as well as degree from any the world has faced. This is so not because it aims at world conquest (which it does), but because it combines physical and psychological force and because, for the first time, the technical weapons of physical and psychological warfare are sufficiently effective to make the aim of world conquest attainable. Therefore, reconciling national interests—something one did (in between wars) by old-fashioned diplomacy—does not apply. For the procedure assumes that everybody's national interest has some limits, subjective or objective; but the Soviet Union's national interest is unlimited, as is in the nature of totalitarianism, Nazi or Communist.

The profession of reconciling national interests required another essential condition: that the respective old-fashioned diplomats were in practical control of the situations they were reconciling. There have been periods when social forces were sufficiently stable to allow statesmen to haggle away peo-

ple's destinies with comparative, though obviously temporary, impunity. But today power is a highly volatile substance; it won't stay put on green baize tables or on those little portable scales old-fashioned diplomats carry in those attaché cases. Today, as never before, power is people in motion, not documents with official seals. Diplomacy might be able to deal with Mossadegh, but how can it deal with the Tudeh party? What can diplomacy—the old-fashioned kind—do about land-hungry peasants in India, Moslem fanaticism in Egypt, the unemployed in Italy, neutralism in France, or the preventive-war psychology in the United States? What can diplomacy do about the Cominform that it wasn't able to do about the Comintern? Unfortunately for the players of the old game, not only have the ground rules changed, but the ground itself is heaving.

I have tried without success to find some subtle connection between containment and old-fashioned diplomacy, two pillars of Kennan's faith. Can containment mean a balance of power between the Soviet world and the rest of mankind? But Kennan's justification for containment in the first place was his own convincing demonstration that Stalinism won't stay balanced, even when it says it will. No doubt Stalin would sign a pact dividing the world with the President of the United States. He has already signed several. But Stalin would again, as he has, upset the balance by methods far beyond the reach of old-fashioned diplomacy.

How can these extra-diplomatic methods be met? Insofar as they are being met in Korea, it is being done through an approach that could be called, because of the involvement of the United Nations, legal and moral. Kennan throws the UN into the wastebasket, along with the Kellogg Pact, the Hague conventions, and other scraps of paper. This seems to me not only bravado but, again, pseudo-realism: it fails to consider the UN experience in Korea, which tends to undermine his whole case against international law. Old-fashioned diplomacy may have had some kind of program at hand

when the Communists moved in Korea. But the course our government chose—at a moment, strangely enough, when Kennan was planning its foreign policy—was to try activation of collective military resistance through the UN. In doing so we invoked, for what it was worth, the existing system of international law.

The UN authorized military action. It reaffirmed its old aim: a united, independent, and democratic Korea. It committed itself to the economic reconstruction of Korea. The whole operation was legalistic and moralistic, and it nevertheless involved a realistic resort to consistently limited force. Because of "the inevitable association of legalistic ideas with moralistic ones," says Kennan, military action when undertaken "knows no bounds short of the reduction of the lawbreaker to the point of complete submissiveness—namely, unconditional surrender." Not in Korea, at least not yet. Nor has the UN applied its law "inflexibly," which Kennan claims is a fault of international legalism that diplomacy avoids. If Kennan were correct, there would be no truce talks in Korea; there would be only a trial of the aggressors. The Korean experience so far demonstrates that the legalistic-moralistic approach is capable of military moderation, that it doesn't necessarily throw the whole law book at the offender, and that a measure of effective international military cooperation is possible.

The present American sentiment for localizing the war in Korea is not surprising. Why assume that the people are incapable of understanding the consequences of total war or are possessed with a mass-suicidal urge? Much more remarkable was the initial unanimity for going to war against a force that had not attacked us physically. The reason for it, it seems to me, could not have been concern over the upsetting of the balance of power. Fighting in Korea meant national mobilization and death for draftees. For such sacrifices, people instinctively seek a higher aim than redressing the balance of power by applying counter-force in a place they hardly heard of. The people reacted as they did because their sense of justice was outraged.

When they fail to react in this way, American democracy can close up shop.

CERTAINLY moral indignation can get out of hand—especially when the moral issue is trumped up and the deception must be blanketed by hysteria. This has happened. But in the case of the UN action in Korea, many Americans somehow recognize a fundamentally valid moral cause for which to fight. Among the reasons for this is a growing understanding of the nature of the enemy. But certainly, another of the reasons is the involvement of the UN. The UN has helped validate the war and is partly responsible for the unexpected combination of determination and restraint with which it is being carried on.

The UN is an operating international organism only in an amoebic sense. But it is the moral rallying ground for the defense of certain values which many people, including Americans, share. For some Americans, and they are probably among the least emotional and subjective in their reactions, the national interest is identical with the aims of the UN. Against these aims we have verified our own response to Stalinist totalitarianism, and we know it is not an empty moralistic improvisation. As a result we have been willing to sustain both the physical burdens and the emotional disciplines of a sober war in Korea. It is doubtful that we could have done this unilaterally, under some arid interpretation of containment.

Furthermore, whether the hoarders of national sovereignty like it or not, the UN as a symbol is developing a sanction of its own. While this sanction is physically unenforceable, it can have a decisive effect on the minds of free men. Almost every aspect of the UN's war, even much of its military strategy, is open to the world's scrutiny and subject to correction against a public, universally recognized, standard of conduct. This situation means that democratic leadership must be alert; it provides as good a guarantee as is now available against corruption of the war's political aims and bravura in its military operations.

For many people, the UN is a democratic crusade. It is one of the alternative crusades to Soviet totalitarianism. One would not have thought it a particularly effective one were it not for the fierce efforts of the Soviets to destroy it and return to old-fashioned big-power diplomacy. Apart from people's long-term hopes for the UN, which Kennan would dismiss as the delusions of amateurs, the UN has been demonstrably valuable for even a narrow concept of containment. It is enormously important for our purposes outside the Atlantic world that Korea is, if only on the record, a UN and not an American or Anglo-American operation. What makes the threat to Viet Nam and Malaya particularly serious is the probability that in a showdown the Atlantic powers would have to go it alone, without even moral support from the UN, because of the remnants of colonialism in these areas.

It is being said that the United States has perverted the UN into nothing more than an anti-Soviet alliance. If this is true, it is a criticism of the Soviets and not of us. In any case, the elimination of everything totalitarianism stands for is one way of describing the basic aims of the UN charter. But UN support against totalitarianism seems to be available only on terms that make it a valid struggle. No doubt the State Department, to rally international support for resistance in Korea, used all the methods it could get away with. But it would not have been possible to get almost the entire world outside the Soviet bloc committed in some degree unless Korea had involved a moral issue which free people could recognize clearly.

KENNAN ignores economic policy completely. He has managed to produce a book on American foreign policy which does not even mention the Marshall Plan. Economic aid can be crucial in underdeveloped areas, a segment of the world Kennan also ignores. Economic aid through functional international organizations (a phenomenon which Kennan, again, ignores) might solve some of the serious difficulties involved in insuring effective use of such aid. By itself, economic

aid is not a panacea. In the end it might simply increase the value of prizes that will go to Moscow. How economic aid can assure a democratic development in receiving countries and avoid undemocratic attitudes in donor countries is one of the most urgent problems we face. One would have thought that our policy-planners would be applying themselves to such matters.

The unrelieved negativism of Kennan's total approach to the international scene is frightening. He is for containment, but in what sense is he against Communism or for democracy? At one point he urges us to accept power realities "without feeling the obligation of moral judgment, to take them as existing and inalterable human forces, neither good nor bad, and to seek their point of maximum equilibrium rather than their reform or their repression." At the same time, he describes the Soviet role in the world, which he hopes it will abandon, as "the ancient game of imperialist expansion and oppression." Is this what the Soviet dynamo amounts to—the ancient game, played by many powers in the past, to be played by others in the future, nothing to get excited about, nothing you can change or ought to change, something you bring into equilibrium through the good old doctrine of the diplomatic popular front? In proposing containment, has Kennan avoided making a moral judgment? Is Soviet totalitarianism neither good nor bad? Is its drive for world conquest alterable or inalterable? Does not containment mean its reform, if alterable, or its repression, if inalterable?

Kennan is caught in a trap of his own making. He has decided that moral reactions are not to be trusted. He therefore expects people not to have any, and he does not permit himself any either. His intelligence perceives, at least partly, the nature of the Soviet system, but he resists a final synthesis and a judgment. He is left, therefore, with the immorality of old-fashioned diplomacy. Limited by the restraints he inflicts on himself, his only essential complaint against the Soviets can be that they disturb the balance of power.